

CAN'T HELP BUT HELP: VALERIA LUISELLI AND THE POWER OF TRANSLATION

HANNAH HALBERSTAM

In her essay “Tell Me How It Ends,” Valeria Luiselli walks the reader through her work as a volunteer translator for migrant children entering the United States. Luiselli gives the reader a sampling of the questions she must ask each child, as well as the effect asking these questions has on her: “It’s impossible not to read and answer [the undocumented children’s questionnaire] with a growing feeling that the world has indeed become a more fucked-up place than what we all imagined it could be” (143). Presumably in response to this feeling, Luiselli describes how other people have taken action: her niece’s decision to major in law and work with area activists (174); her students’ formation of an action coalition (176) to work with undocumented immigrants. She speaks favorably about their choices, leading the reader to understand that she respects people who have taken action, who have done what they can to help reduce the damage this questionnaire reflects. And so, we expect Luiselli to view her own work as providing an essential kind of help to these children as well. But this is not how Luiselli characterizes it. When describing a conversation with one young man she worked with, she reveals having told him, “I’m no policewoman, I’m no official anyone, I’m not even a lawyer. I’m also not a gringa, you know? In fact, I can’t help you at all” (166).

Why would Luiselli say that she “can’t help . . . at all,” despite focusing throughout the rest of the essay on the absolute necessity of helping? What is she doing each day, if not helping? Throughout the essay, Luiselli gives us insight into what her days volunteering look like. She writes, “my task . . . is a simple one: I translate children’s stories from Spanish to English” (141). Here, she calls herself a translator, nothing more. But being a translator seems, by definition, to be helping people understand each other, which is absolutely essential, for example, for judges to grant the children visas (158-159). Thus, it seems reasonable to say that, despite what Luiselli says, one could indeed characterize her as “helping” the children with whom she works. So why doesn’t she think of herself that way?

To consider the answer, it is worth looking at the context surrounding Luiselli’s claim that she can’t help. She made this claim during a conversation with a boy she refers to as Manu, the first undocumented minor for whom she translated. Luiselli describes how, when she first asked him a question, Manu said nothing, only shrugged slightly and stayed silent (166). It was after this non-response that she told him: “I’m no policewoman, I’m no official anyone, I’m not even a lawyer. I’m also not a gringa. . . In fact, I can’t help you at all” (166). In relaying the conversation to the reader, Luiselli describes her action as “reassur[ing] [Manu]” (166). It isn’t immediately obvious why

saying she is unable to help would be reassuring, but Luiselli seems to be right that it is. Her statement marks the turning point in her conversation with Manu: it breaks his silence. What, then, is it about this claim that worked? Why would Manu find something reassuring in the idea that the woman he was talking to could not help him “at all?”

By saying Luiselli can’t help Manu, she characterizes herself as lacking power and authority in the US immigration system. More specifically, she characterizes herself as someone who has no more power and authority than Manu. To “help” would mean there was something she could do for Manu that he could not simply do for himself. (In this sense, she actually can help—she can translate Manu’s stories from Spanish to English, something he cannot do on his own—but the claim that she cannot help need not be perfectly accurate to accomplish something in her conversation with Manu, or even to reflect some kind of truth.) In terms of accomplishing something in the conversation, her statement is successful: it establishes a common ground with Manu. As they continue to talk, Luiselli describes them as “both newcomers to this situation” (167), and, later, discusses their shared disbelief for the incredible view from the courtroom window (169-170). That is, she genuinely seems to feel she has something in common with Manu, that they both lack a certain kind of power and authority in the system they are attempting to navigate together.

But if this explains why Luiselli told Manu she could not help him, it still leaves open the question of why she chose to include the statement in her essay. She must, of course, have thousands of exchanges she could write about. Why did she decide to recount one in which she stated the work she has devoted so much time to was not helping?

If Luiselli told Manu she couldn’t help him in order to establish some common ground, and to begin to gain his trust, we might wonder whether she had similar reasons for relaying the statement “I can’t help . . . at all” to the reader. It is hard to imagine, however, that she is hoping to get the same reaction from the reader that she got from Manu, given how different her likely target audience—American readers from all walks of life—may be from him. Is it possible Luiselli might be trying to reassure her readers, too? Or is she hoping her readers understand something completely different when hearing this statement?

The answer may be both. To better understand what Luiselli wants the reader to take from this statement, let us first consider what she might want the reader to take from the essay as a whole. When describing the action coalition her students formed after attending her class, she says, “It only takes a group of ten motivated students to begin making a small difference” (176). That is: even a small group with motivation, initiative, and energy can make things better. When discussing what drives her to tell stories, Luiselli says it is a “combination of anger and clarity,” and a “country that is as beautiful as it is broken.” She and her family are somehow now part of it, “so we are also broken with it and . . . we have to do something about that.” These emotions,

then, drive her to tell stories, which is her way of making change. For Luiselli, anger drives her to tell stories, which is her way of making change. Finding America broken makes her feel as though she, too, is broken, and, thus, that she has no choice but to try to repair this brokenness. It seems reasonable to assume, in an essay that centers around such a fundamentally broken part of America—the immigration system, and in particular, the intake system for undocumented children—that she expects the reader to come to a similar conclusion, to also think, *this country, this system, is broken and because I am a part of it, I am broken, too, and must help repair it.*

But if Luiselli wants the reader to see the entire essay as a call to action, why state in the middle of the piece that the action she herself is taking is not a form of “help”? Isn’t that terribly demoralizing? Luiselli has put in all this work, one might think, and still, she isn’t helping at all? If that’s the case, a reader might well wonder why they should ever hope to help. This could be a reasonable takeaway—but only if Luiselli had not already made it so clear how helpful she really is being. The reader knows that she is a translator, and that she is helping children tell their stories to judges who have the power to decide whether or not to issue visas to these children. Readers know that what she is doing is essential.

This suggests that Luiselli relays this statement to the reader for the same reason she told Manu: to establish common ground. It tells the reader that they are not alone in feeling absolutely overwhelmed, helpless, and powerless in a system that is as complicated as it is disturbing. In Luiselli’s words, there is a “trail of bloodshed” from “Patagonia to Alaska,” which is “one of the bloodiest and cruelest spectacles that the twenty-first century has given” (156). In the face of this, who *wouldn’t* feel helpless?

Certainly not Luiselli. This, then, finally allows us to see the twin purpose of Luiselli’s statement that she cannot help Manu at all. It establishes common ground twice, with two different audiences. First, it tells Manu that Luiselli, like Manu, lacks power and authority in the immigration system, and thus, that even if he may not trust her, it is safe for him to talk to her. And second, it tells the reader that Luiselli, too, knows what it is like to feel unable to help, but that she takes action nonetheless. For Manu, common ground offers reassurance; for the reader, it is a call to action.

The antidote to feeling powerless is not to turn away from the problem that made you feel that way, Luiselli seems to be telling us. The antidote to feeling powerless is to keep fighting, just as she does over and over, after every horrific story she hears, after every demoralizing day that leaves her with a “feeling of frustration, a sense of defeat” (159). A broken country leaves all of its people broken along with it. There might be no sure way to fix it. Luiselli certainly does not offer a solution or an easy path forward. But she does force us to see that we must keep taking action to make things better.

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THE CUTE AND CONSUMABLE IN “BAD ENGLISH”

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In her essay “Bad English,” Cathy Park Hong discusses her complex relationship with overcoming the commodification of her culture through her unique expression of “bad English.” As a child of Korean immigrants navigating the English-speaking society of America, her anecdotes reflect the overall minority experience of Asian cultures and their unique ways of overlapping with the English language. Throughout the essay, Hong’s structural choices bolster the point of embracing “bad English”; her examples are disjointed, jumping between anecdotes interspersed with humor or risqué language, mirroring the occasionally incoherent, often unpredictable nature of “bad English” itself. Yet she successfully communicates the complexities of her experience by presenting multiple real-world examples and personal anecdotes regarding language.

Perhaps this is why Hong’s introductory anecdote, her childhood hunger for cutesy Japanese stationery, is so unexpected. Describing her obsession for her animal-shaped erasers as so intense that she “had to repress the urge to bite their heads off” (91) doesn’t seem to connect with the later examples she provides to explore the multifaceted nature of navigating language as an immigrant, none of which mention stationery. Hong highlights how her mother’s conversations with Americans would cause a “white person . . . [to] put on a fright mask of strained tolerance,” articulating her mother’s hardships almost perfectly, but making her discussion of animal erasers seem even more distant from her struggle with language (98-99). What makes the stationery anecdote so curious is that it is the opening for an entire discussion about language, yet it does not mention language even once. At a first glance, this stationery example seems absurd, over the top and only appearing in the first few pages, leaving readers to question Hong’s intent with including it in the first place. We are prompted to consider the importance of Hong’s vivid descriptions of raw, unfiltered desire for something so mundane, and what this metaphor might represent with regards to “bad English.”

To explore the meaning behind Hong’s stationery anecdote, we must consider the not-so-obvious parallels it draws to other parts of the text. While detailing her experiences of interactions between Korean and English in her daily life, Hong emphasizes her disdain towards English. She posits her own method of othering English: “to eat English before it eats [her],” highlighting the consumptive relationship between the two languages (97). She uses violent imagery to denote the predatory nature of the interaction between the two cultures, with American culture “devouring” her own. The idea of raw hunger draws a parallel to Hong’s anecdote about stationery, specifically regarding her relationship with her Hello Kitty mechanical pencils, having

the “urge to bite their heads off” (91). The profane depiction of one person engulfing or consuming an object metaphorizes Hong’s initial premise that English might eat Korean. Ironically, her childhood self in this metaphor plays the role of the perpetrator. By placing herself in the shoes of the perpetrator and mimicking how she feels they act towards Asian cultures, we better understand how she feels about Western English—how it has abused and contorted her family heritage. Through this vivid depiction, we see her perspective on how Western English has brutally and barbarically “consumed” Korean, and by extension, other Asian cultures.

Viewing the anecdote about stationery as a metaphor for this relationship between Western English and Asian languages allows us to see Hong’s other personal examples of language in a new light. For instance, when describing how English has “flattened,” or reduced the authenticity of, Asian cultures, Hong notices how “a new TV Asian accent has emerged . . . [which is] so pandering and full of cute banter” (99). The concept of a “TV accent” seems self-contradictory; accents are inherently natural, but the fact that a “new” one has “emerged” implies that such a TV accent has been artificially manufactured by Westerners to indulge or satisfy their audience—one that has been materialized, almost fetishized, by mass media. Analyzing Hong’s relationship with her stationery can shed light on this relationship. She claims that the reason she wants to devour her stationery is that people have “an overwhelming desire to eat what is cute . . . and therefore cuteness is ideal for mass commodification because of its consumability” (94). The motif of hunger is evident through the parallelism of her “eating” her pencils and English “eating” Korean, which illustrates what she feels has happened to Asian languages—that they have been commodified and consumed by Western English. The anecdote helps visualize the distortion of Asian accents in the media and TV; in making a foreign accent “user-friendly,” they have misrepresented the original language. Hence, we see that this initially perplexing anecdote serves as a tool to help the audience understand this nuanced consumptive relationship between Western English and Asian cultures: it crystallizes the complexities of navigating language as a Korean immigrant into an easily accessible, mundane visual representation.

Yet despite the description of this consumptive interaction, we are still left to consider what Hong is trying to say about this relationship. By detailing her personal experiences, Hong not only identifies a tension, but also justifies why she uses “bad” English as the antidote to English’s consumption of other languages. Repeatedly describing her English as “bad” allows Hong to emphasize how different versions of English, with “verbs forever disagreeing,” are often labeled as “bad” by Americans (92). We are then able to consider how having a concept of “bad” English postulates that there is a “good” English—and that this in itself is a manufactured hierarchical concept maintained by those who desire a sense of superiority. This idea of maintaining superiority by discriminating against “different Englishes” can be understood by seeing it as synonymous with Hong’s stationery anecdote and her

“sadistic desires to master and violate” her vulnerable mechanical pencils (94). The malicious connotation of the terms “violate” and “sadistic” illustrate Hong’s belief that those who segregate “good” and “bad” English are inherently malignant. The idea of “master[ing]” her mechanical pencils further bolsters the idea of the uneven power dynamic between Western and Asian cultures. At first, it seems strange that Hong would explicitly portray herself as selfish, sadistic, and cruel; however, we see she is simply describing her beliefs about the Western world in “mastering” Asian languages—that this stems from a barbaric place, primarily to satiate selfish desires. The absurdity of this anecdote echoes the absurdity of this power dynamic as a whole—as if Hong uses this easy-to-visualize interaction between herself and mechanical pencils to outline how ludicrous it is that Western English is trying to assert its superiority over other languages.

While Hong’s discussion of her relationship with stationery can delineate the dichotomy between English and Asian languages, the question remains: structurally, how does this anecdote suit Hong’s purpose? Why does Hong begin with this example, deliberately throwing readers off with seemingly sexual language by discussing her “special, almost erotic, relationship with [her] stationery,” rather than simply engaging in the discussion of language directly (91)? To interpret her intent, we must consider the nature of “bad English” itself. Throughout her essay, Hong provides multiple examples of what she considers bad English, particularly how it is “short, barbed, and broken” (92). We can begin to see how the way she describes “bad English” as having “subject and object nouns conjoined in odd marriages” parallels her essay structure, particularly with the marriage of anecdotes, real-world examples, and profane language (92). By commenting on the way “bad English” puts ideas and words together that seem “odd,” she characterizes the unconventional nature of this way of speaking. Similarly, Hong places the anecdote about stationery at the start where it seems “odd,” and interrupts other anecdotes with references back to the stationery or overall motif of hunger. By using this striking anecdote as a strategic structural choice to mirror the nature of “bad English,” we can better understand the concept. Just as the stationery anecdote initially seems strangely out of place, but later begins to make sense as it presents a valid point about the Western consumption of Asian languages, Hong elucidates how “bad English” itself may not be so absurd. Yes, “bad English” may be jarring, as emphasized by the discordant nature of the initial stationery anecdote, but this type of English ultimately communicates the same valid points as Westernized English—just in a different way. In demonstrating this point, Hong indirectly communicates to us that once we understand the validity of so-called “bad English,” it isn’t so “bad”; however, we must make the distinction between “bad” English and “different” English so that we begin to appreciate rather than antagonize it.

Hong’s description of her stationery is indeed jarring when it first appears. However, its out-of-place nature not only allows us to interpret the relationship between Western English and Asian languages in a new light, distilling it into an easy-

to-digest visualization, but it also tells us about the nature of “bad English” itself: non-Western forms of English may defy our conventional expectations, but the unique coalescence of disjointed words and phrases communicates something equally beautiful.

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MELODY AND MELANCHOLIA: PHOEBE BRIDGERS AND THE GRIEVING WHITE WOMAN

SERENA DENG

Phoebe Bridgers' *Instagram* profile picture is a selfie of her crying in the bath, gold eyeshadow and mascara running down her cheeks. Since her debut album in 2017, Bridgers has been known for producing music laden with personal sorrows. Almost five years later, following her second album, Bridgers is still in mourning. She is "Alive with Melancholy," according to the *New York Times* (Marchese), and "Very, Very Sad" according to *W* magazine (Hirschberg). Bridgers' persona of grief fits into the discussion surrounding pathological grief, introduced by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud defines "melancholia" as a state of perpetual, pathological mourning, where the subject loses interest in everything besides mourning (244). But Bridgers' sadness is more complicated than Freud proposes. When mourning is no longer an internal affair, but something performed for viewers to consume, outward social forces dictate the nature of this mourning more than the individual mourner. With the rise of artists like Bridgers—those female indie singers the world expects to keep singing about loss—how can we integrate society into Freud's individualist model of melancholia? How do individuals cope when their mourning becomes a sought-after commodity?

Melancholia, Freud argues, is trapped in an individual's unconscious and reveals internal, pathological affliction. Unlike in mourning, individuals are unconsciously unable to pinpoint what exactly they have lost, and thus cannot let go of or recover from it (Freud 244-46). By Freud's definition, Bridgers exhibits characteristics of melancholic mental illness, her discography steeped in personal experiences of grief. "Funeral" reflects on ideating suicide as a result of grieving the death of a friend, and "Motion Sickness" deals with mourning the loss of a lover despite suffering abuse from them. From deaths to lost lovers to self-hatred, Bridgers indiscriminately mourns it all, the sources of her grief perhaps becoming peripheral to the grief itself. On *Spotify*, she's featured in playlists like "Sad Indie" and "sad girl starter pack." The top search result in user-made playlists, a "complete playlist of everything," features a snapshot of Bridgers with makeup-smudging tears reminiscent of her *Instagram* profile, as if this stereotypically feminine depiction of grief encapsulates her discography. Bridgers' artistic identity of solely sadness typifies Freud's model of melancholia. Thus, in applying Freud to Bridgers, we might conclude that Bridgers suffers from internal and psychological damage that refuses to let her escape melancholia.

However, Bridgers isn't alone as a melancholic artist. Many others, particularly white, cis, women, are known for their sad personas. And throughout history, the art of white women as a whole has stereotypically been viewed as "tragic" and "forlorn"

(Mooney 178). Essayist Leslie Jamison notes historical examples of sad white women in a personal piece on melancholia: in 1712, “The Rape of the Lock” depicts a woman mourning the forced removal of a lock of hair; in 1897, *Dracula* features women being drained of blood; throughout her career in the 20th century, poet Sylvia Plath composed piece after piece about personal agonies (Jamison). Why would white, female subjects of art be psychologically predisposed to melancholia?

Freud’s explanation of melancholia as an issue within one’s own unconscious cannot account for patterns of melancholia within a social group. The questioning of Freud’s focus on internal, “one-person psychology” comes up in “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” by writer David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han (345). They argue that exterior influences on certain social groups can be one cause of melancholia in denying them the ability to escape reminders of their loss, leading to “unresolved” loss (Eng and Han 344). Specifically focusing on Asian American melancholia, Han and Eng observe that racial stereotypes force people of color to be perpetually reminded of their estrangement from Americanness and whiteness, thus grieving for this lost ideal perpetually (345). Han and Eng expand the scope of the causes of melancholia: in addition to internal forces, social forces can also incite melancholia, and likely do when entire demographics are involved.

The phenomenon of the sad white female artist, too, is socially rather than individually catalyzed. As a male-dominated world paints them as objects of desire, women often have to emphasize various aspects of femininity to be attractive—feminine pain and weakness being one—in order to be sellable (Dibben 334). Though not racial stereotypes, stereotypes of desirable femininity also force specific demographics into melancholia. Jamison cites Susan Sontag, who observes that the grief of women is “interesting” and alluringly “vulnerable,” and that “the melancholy character [is] a superior one” (qtd. in Jamison). Perceived by society as attractive and valued above other appearances, melancholia is a look that society asks women to take on, and praises them for. Because of this expectation placed on women, female artists do not always become melancholic, or become labeled as melancholic, of their own accord.

Bridgers is self-aware of the demands on her suffering. In her song “Savior Complex,” she sings, “Baby, you’re a vampire / You want blood and I promised.” She purposefully aligns herself with women stereotyped into baring their pain, invoking a lover-turned-Dracula that asks for her blood. Contrary to Freud, Bridgers is pigeonholed into melancholia by societal expectations that demand for her to keep revisiting sites of personal loss for popular consumption. In *W* magazine, when the interviewer asks whether she writes sad music “to release her demons,” Bridgers responds, “Perhaps . . . It can put you in a box, where you feel like you can’t write anything but heartfelt songs that offer an emotional release . . . Capitalism commodifies women’s pain.” (Hirschberg). Bridgers remains unconvinced that her music is a personal pursuit to cope with inner troubles, answering with a doubtful

“perhaps.” Instead, she understands her ontology of sadness to be a product of societal—specifically capitalistic—forces. This commodification of women’s pain puts Bridgers in a melancholic box, being asked to produce song after song about loss. This metaphoric boxing-in suggests, furthermore, that outside of a melancholic space, Bridgers lacks existence.

As Bridgers performs melancholia through her music, her melancholia erases her own identity. In melancholia, Bridgers becomes the subject and object of grief as her self is lost to stereotypes of womanhood. Freud notes that self-loss is a principal result of melancholia as a subject identifies with what they have lost so much that they mourn their own ego alongside the object, that their ego itself becomes an object to be annihilated (252). Eng and Han further find self-mourning to be an inevitable result of stereotyping, observing that the model minority myth turns Asian Americans themselves into the lost object as they overwrite their identity with a stereotyped one: “Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order to be at all . . . mimicry can operate only as a melancholic process” (350). The sad woman stereotype, too, demands mimicry from female artists to please consumers, to “be at all.” In playing into these stereotypes, what Jamison calls “limited and outmoded conceptions of womanhood,” women “no longer fully own their feelings.” It can “[start] to feel like you’re playing a character . . . It can get dangerous,” Bridgers remarks (Hirschberg). She acknowledges that by mimicking something she isn’t—an appearance of perpetual sadness—she becomes an exemplary “character” of womanhood to sell to the public eye, endangering her real self.

Eng and Han liken this Freudian self-mourning to being “haunted by ghosts,” reminders of parts of your identity that you have been forced to shed (349). Bridgers has come to terms with becoming spectral: “A haunted house with a picket fence / To float around and ghost my friends / No, I’m not afraid to disappear,” she sings with conviction on “I Know the End,” adding extra emphasis on the word “no.” She acknowledges her own addiction to pain: “After my first record, my mom thought she was going to have to intervene, because every song was so depressing. In fact, I probably needed that, but hey. . . .” (Hirschberg). Though she admits to the severity of being caught in a cycle of melancholia, to the extent that outward intervention would be required to stop it, she brushes it off with a flippant “but hey. . . .” Willingly, Bridgers subjects herself to the image of the ghostly, blood-drained woman that society demands, and thus falls into melancholia.

If conformation to stereotypes of desirable womanhood is etiological to melancholia, how does race factor in? The sad woman trope is most often a sad *white* woman (Mooney 181). In many ways, Bridgers’ life ironically fits the model of unattainable ideals—whiteness and middle-class values—that people of color grieve (Eng and Han 345). Bridgers confesses, “I’m a white girl from Pasadena. I went to a very nice school and had a bunch of friends” (Hirschberg). Perhaps her melancholia

is tinted with her racial and class privilege and her upbringing in an idyllic suburb as much as it is with her womanhood. In her music videos, Bridgers superimposes her sadness onto worlds of whiteness and wealth, depicting grief that is somehow beautiful. In “Smoke Signals,” Bridgers stands at the center of a gothic ballroom decked out in chandeliers and elegant drapes, a crowd of white people swaying around her. Their dark clothing and slow dancing make the scene funeralsque, but their mourning exists in a definitively white, high-class world. White-only spaces crop up in “Motion Sickness,” too, where Bridgers scooters through a picket-fenced suburb, winding up in a karaoke bar, performing in front of a full audience of white people. This alignment of Bridgers’ grief with whiteness comes hand in hand with the beautification of her grief, as the neon lights of the bar illuminate her face as she sings, or as the camera pans out on her in a gorgeous ballroom. Ultimately, the sadness of a white, wealthy class is associated with beauty.

It is because Bridgers’ grief is romanticized by the fantasies of whiteness and wealth that it’s all the more desirable. Han and Eng argue that specific griefs are “acceptably mourned” because they “include access to political, economic, and cultural privilege; alignment with whiteness and the nation” (362). Because the melancholia displayed in Bridgers’ music can be understood through these national ideals it becomes palatable. “Listening felt so bad and so good,” Jamison writes about her favorite artists, all white women: “Those songs gave me scars to try on like costumes . . . I wanted to be killed and resurrected.” The act of experiencing these women’s grief, playing dress-up with their scars, is alluring—a source of resurrection through pain and death. Because of the appeal of their specific types of pain, societal pressures in demanding emotional labor from white women persists.

However, Bridgers’ melancholia is desirable to society as a whole, not just the white-only spectators of the karaoke bar. People of color remain attracted to the pain of white women even though, as Han and Eng claim, they will never be able to attain it. In a *TikTok* from September 2020, user @godbamit, a Black man, professes, “I don’t know why I relate with sad white women so much, but Phoebe Bridgers, if you’re seeing this, you leave me alone” (bam [@godbamit]). His voice trembles into performed desperation, camera shaking violently until his face blurs. Maybe, like Jamison says, it’s through pain that we’re best able to “try on” the “costumes” of others. After all, it’s Bridgers’ performances of melancholia that hollow her songs into ghosts, as if inviting others to fill in translucent spaces with their own identity. Maybe, by putting on Bridgers’ melancholia, people of color can momentarily experience the ideal of white skin as their own, able to indulge in pain that is prettier, more perfect—pain that can be enjoyed as a luxury rather than suffered as a punishment. As the face of @godbamit blurs into obscurity, we can almost imagine his own identity and melancholia melting for a second as he comes into contact with the lost ideal of whiteness.

As Bridgers mourns, we all mourn. As society pushes Bridgers and other white women into artistic melancholia, she broadcasts her pains back, prompting us to grieve with her, to grieve her. We all—white and non-white alike, woman and non-woman alike—are caught up in a collective cycle of mourning the beautified pain of white women, entering a feedback loop where we ask her to show us her wounds so we can forget ours; when she shows them to us, we only ache more. We're haunted by Bridgers' phantoms, "with the same three songs over and over," she sings in "Chinese Satellite." "I wish I wrote it, but I didn't so I learn the words," Bridgers continues, "Hum along 'til the feeling's gone forever."

NOTE

1. All quotes or references to lyrics come from *Genius* (genius.com); all references to music videos come from Phoebe Bridgers on *YouTube* (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCh4PO1W9tVmHujIPZnfK8TQ>).

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THE LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY: PERFORMANCE AND/OR ACTIVISM?

HARRISON GERSON

Colonial history shapes my college experience. I reside in a building named after the man credited for developing the US legal system, at a top private university named after the first conqueror of indigenous lives, on land named after a merchant from another land: John Jay's building, Christopher Columbus' university, and Amerigo Vespucci's land, respectively. These narratives shape my everyday dialogues at Columbia University, which has profited from colonialism for years while ignoring indigenous lives. However, if you look with an observant eye, beneath the brush, a foot above the ground, you will notice the university statement "IN HONOR OF THE LENAPE PEOPLE" that reads:

The Lenape lived here before and during the colonization of the Americas. This plaque recognizes these indigenous people of Manhattan, their displacement, dispossession, and continued presence. It stands as a reminder to reflect on our past as we contemplate our way forward.

Every time I leave my dorm, I pass this plaque and almost always forget its existence. Given its placement on the ground, my peers and I rarely notice it. How telling.

The placement and writing on the plaque leave so much unsaid and ignored about colonial atrocities and their current effects, functioning in tension with indigenous social justice. Columbia installed the plaque in 2016, after three years of petitioning from the university's Native American Council to have a land acknowledgment, gaining over 1,000 electronic signatures on *Change.org* ("Columbia University: Acknowledge Lenape Territory"). After the approval, the then-current President of the Native American Council Julian Brave NoiseCat announced that "[t]here is a lot of work yet to be done" (Woo). Despite the rich indigenous history of lands governed by the US, as of 2020, "1 in 3 Native Americans are living in poverty, with a median income of \$23,000" a year (Redbird). These systemic conditions present barriers to education for many indigenous communities as well. Does this plaque empower the historically oppressed or contribute to systemic issues by merely attempting to place Columbia as a seemingly progressive, politically-correct institution? As an elite institute with "a mission to advance diversity," how can we resolve the rhetoric of the plaque (Bollinger)?

To some, these acknowledgments are a step in the right direction. Publicly, the plaque meant much for the local indigenous community. "A prayer of thanks [was led] by SilverCloud, an [NYC-based] intertribal Native American singing group" (Woo).

Also, the Native American Council “Co-Political Chair Tristan Stidham explains that “It’s nice to see that native peoples and their history are being acknowledged by the administration” (Holmes). When one considers the pride that the plaque brings to the indigenous student community, it recognizes the efforts put into the fight for justice. Rather than simply bashing the university for needing to make more social justice progress (as NoiseCat touches on earlier), the plaque’s installment encourages empowerment and solidarity around the social justice outcome.

Similarly, David Hollinger’s 2006 essay “From Solidarity to Identity” calls on us to look past identity values and unite in solidarity to promote change in the United States. He portrays “solidarity” as “the problem of the twenty-first century,” elucidating the issue of how to qualify support like the plaque within the realms of actual or artificial “solidarity” (Hollinger 23). Hollinger defines “solidarity” as “an experience of willed affiliation” that “is more performative than community” (Hollinger 24).¹ Since the process to unite people to advocate for the plaque was by personal will on *Change.org*, Hollinger allows us to perceive the plaque as an act in solidarity, rather than an act of virtue signaling that further embeds systemic issues. Solidarity can function as positive societal change when understanding that it must “be addressed differently depending on the specific constitutional and cultural circumstances on which it arises” (Hollinger 30). When understanding the deep systemic imbalances in the university, one can view the plaque as an object of solidarity towards reform, expressing optimism towards the performance of installing the plaque. Hollinger’s argument, however, is not very critical of performative actions that do not directly challenge systems of oppression, which allows the observer to become critical of his “willed affiliation” within a context of activism.

In tension with Hollinger’s perspective, Saidiya Hartman’s 2019 essay “The Plot of Her Undoing”—which discusses how power structures continually hurt women of color and other oppressed peoples—offers an account of marginalization that resonates with the plaque. She specifically uses examples that draw the reader to critically view power structures and forms of solidarity. She elaborates that “[t]he plot of her undoing begins with . . . a short account of the destruction of the Indies” (Hartman 3). Like this “short account” which further embeds systemic issues, the shortness of the three sentences on the plaque does little to create real, positive change; there is so little said about the pain of millions of indigenous peoples and their continued marginalization. The text cannot equate to the lives affected, so it functions in tension with its purpose to improve social justice. Similarly, “[t]he plot of her undoing begins with a man in his study writing a tome about the Americas, the species, the fauna, the races” (Hartman 1). In keeping with Hartman’s imagery, the plaque sticks out almost like an informative marker with the scientific name and range of a local plant; it is missable. The plaque draws many similarities with the idea that the university is not fully addressing systemic issues faced by indigenous peoples. Hartman elaborates that the harm begins “with a treaty ceasing all hostilities,” implying that

statements of peace do not help but rather further embed the systemic issues at hand (3). Implied colonialism and oppression are present even on the plaque itself. The statement ends with an imprint of the university name and its “King’s Crown” logo which have hegemonic undertones. On the *Change.org* website that the Native American Council used to gain support in 2013, the organization points out that “Using the name ‘Columbia’ and King’s Crown imagery, the University already implicitly acknowledges the fact that the school has prospered because of a colonial legacy that entailed the persecution and removal of the original owners of this land—the Lenni Lenape people” (“Columbia University: Acknowledge Lenape Territory”). With Hartman’s elaboration, these calls for justice from the university without systemic changes allow us to perceive the plaque as merely a harmful attempt to place the university along with its partner American institutions in a position that displays social justice without acting on it, critiquing the entire situation.

However, Hartman’s institutional affiliation as a Columbia professor ingrains her within a system that has profited off of colonialism, despite her activism. However, she uses her Columbia platform to strengthen her work. To make progress, such colonial systems seem impossible to escape, as we all are living within its fruition. This feeling that we cannot escape the remnants of colonialism leaves interpretive room for the reader to relate injustices to Hartman’s text that occurred after its 2019 publication. Her writerly choices in the essay facilitate this. Rather than using a specific event, Hartman often chooses to use broad terms such as “an executive order,” “the rule of law,” and “a man who looks presidential” to describe policies that begin “the plot of her undoing” (3, 5). Hartman encourages the reader to view flawed policies given the context of their present. For a Columbia affiliate in 2022, that might be President Bollinger’s policies, including the installation of the plaque, which leads the reader to question if and how the plaque represents empowerment and solidarity.

Between Hartman’s critical view of actions from hegemonic structures and Hollinger’s positive solidarity-building atmosphere, the plaque sets itself somewhere in between the two perspectives, allowing a step forward with a critique of the current atmosphere. Hartman and Hollinger’s beliefs on larger American systems and communities not helping to end systemic issues connect with their acknowledgment of imperfections and delays. Hollinger reiterates that “we cannot count on the rest of the population” but rather that we can only count on proactive allies who demonstrate solidarity through their action (23). A thousand signatures led the core charge for the plaque, which took lots of solidarity, yet 1,000 is only about 10% of the undergraduate students at Columbia; the signers’ “willed affiliation” contributed to their steps forward, and the actions took much time and effort (Hollinger 24). Accordingly, when discussing potential solutions to solving systemic issues, Hartman outlines that “[t]he undoing of the plot . . . advances at a snail’s pace,” like the three-year journey to attain the plaque (5). These perspectives point to the idea that current American structures will not support a radical shift towards social justice but rather shift gradually with the

actions of those who care in solidarity. There will never be a perfect response; noticing the inequities that become more apparent with the plaque's installation process encourages further justice.

The gradual advancement of social justice also echoes structural capitalism in the United States (which is a product of colonialism), as this system embeds many injustices. The plaque, accordingly, allows observers to critique the capitalistic systems of the United States and private educational institutions like Columbia. For many, the plaque serves as a reminder of the work that American institutions should do in the future. The university historically runs on a capitalist model with its roots shaped by colonialism, and "capitalism has little respect for any affiliations that it cannot turn to its own purposes" (Hollinger 25). Hartman similarly alludes to capitalist ventures which harm the oppressed, like "[bills] of sale . . . financial [transactions,] and exchanges" (1,3). Hollinger and Hartman both imply that the system has slowed down the process towards growth; this point allows us to view the university's systemic structure as a powerful inhibitor of the growth of historically oppressed communities. Yet, it is the slow breakdown of the structure, starting with the plaque's acknowledgment, that allows others to begin their journey to bring social justice.

Perhaps we can view Columbia's actions with the plaque as a move of solidarity, however, not directly from the university, but rather from the adapting reactions of the community on a path towards justice. We see an example of imperfect American solidarity that strengthens future indigenous activism but does little tangible social justice with its placement. To philosopher Michael Waltzer, "America is still a radically unfinished society, and for now, at least, it makes sense to say that this unfinishedness is one of its distinctive features" (614). Waltzer highlights in his 1990 essay "What Does It Mean to Be an 'American'?*" that this imperfection drives American progression through its collisions of diverse cultures. The United States has "appropriated the adjective 'American,'" displaying the idea that much of our sentiment on what the country represents is fabricated and complicated by competing interests (Waltzer 591). By acknowledging the appropriation of its name, our country is transforming. Similar to Hartman's paradoxical employment at the institution, there is no "aim [for] a finished or fully coherent Americanism" (Waltzer 614). When placed in a context of social justice disparities, there is no way for us to completely create a just world; there is always disparity. Rather, we have to utilize these experiences to overcome injustices. The plaque, for instance, reminds me of conversations with my Navajo peer who does indigenous research with Columbia. She makes me more aware of the current benefits and research advocacy that the university provides to historically oppressed groups, albeit colonial structures persist with Columbus' name on her emails, publications, and media with the university, as does the Columbia logo on the plaque. Like Hartman, she undertakes her advocacy work in an environment in tension with her movement; she too embraces the imperfect American solidarity. Perhaps, one can view the plaque as a step in the right direction, not necessarily

because of the university's system, but rather because it allows a critical view of the university's decision about the plaque, inspiring them to promote real productive change to break the structural imbalances in the United States.

In the larger context, what is happening at Columbia University, a privileged university committed to empowering diversity in education, represents a mere window into the oppression that is burrowed into other American institutions, especially other private universities which do not have the resources, leadership, and activism to promote change. Along with lower college enrollment rates, Native American graduation rates at four-year institutions remain at 41%, lower than the national average of 63% ("Factsheets"). Yet, just as I have become inspired to write this essay, the plaque facilitates questioning and advocacy vital for social justice. Understanding the absence of systemic changes from the university functioning critically with the presence of a plaque allows scholarly thinkers to further critique societal imbalances and the structures that perpetuate them to promote change.

NOTE

1. Performative implies positive impact in this expression. The negative connotations around the phrase "performative activism" were not as prevalent in 2006 and were likely not considered.

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WHO IS THE REAL SNAKE? ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF KILLING INVASIVE SPECIES

YONI KURTZ

The kitschy, yet dramatic music plays. A reporter stands in a random marsh vaguely reminiscent of the story she is about to tell. You see some home-video quality clips, and of course, you hear the iconic closing line: “I’m Janine Stanwood. Local 10 News” (Pythons 2:22). Yes, local news segments can sometimes appear to be pointless time-fillers, but they do occasionally hit on controversial topics, such as the segment referenced here on “python hunters,” mercenaries paid by Florida’s government to catch and kill invasive Burmese pythons in the Florida Everglades.

Although the hunters make sure to emphasize that their primary objective is ecological, emphatically stating, “every single python that we take out is one less consuming our native wildlife” (Pythons 1:55), watching the clip, one gets the sense that the python hunters are not solely committed to preserving South Florida’s native wildlife, and may even have some less-than-savory opinions regarding the humane treatment of animals. As videos play of the hunters wrestling their catch, a record-setting 18-foot python, they provide their commentary, with lines like “That is so much bigger than anything I’ve ever caught before” and “I don’t know if I could sleep at night losing one that big” (1:33, 1:48). It is tough to miss the massive thrill that the hunters get from wrangling the snakes, especially as they dramatically describe their python-catching process and the “tricked-out Ford Escape” that they use to catch the animals (1:00). The local reporter, Janine Stanwood, glosses over this contradiction, ending the segment by reminding viewers that every python caught is “humanely euthanized” (2:15). This assuring, even academic phrase seems out of place next to the epic action shots of men wearing sleeveless t-shirts battling minivan-sized poisonous snakes. The news clip implies that despite the enjoyment that these men derive from wrestling enormous snakes and the compensation that they receive for it, the hunters are thoughtful ethical actors who are so concerned for native wildlife that they go to the trouble to capture and humanely euthanize pythons (0:16, 2:12). The phrase “humanely euthanized” immediately grounds the clip away from the exciting hunt and down into the ethical debate about animal rights, and that is where the local news editors decide to cut the clip.

One could argue that the mixed motives this clip captures invite a broader discussion about the ethics of killing invasive species. In 1975, Peter Singer, a famous ethicist, published a controversial book titled *Animal Liberation* in which he used principles of equal rights (typically applied to humans) to persuasively argue against killing animals under any circumstance. In the chapter titled “All Animals Are Equal,”

Singer does not distinguish between invasive species and native species, arguing that causing any animal suffering should be seen as equal to causing the equivalent suffering to a human, and should therefore be forbidden. Michael Pollan, a science journalist and critic of Singer, responded to *Animal Liberation* in his 2002 article in the *New York Times* titled “An Animal’s Place.” In this article, Pollan grants Singer’s general point regarding inhumanely killing domesticated animals for food, but argues that invasive species belong in a separate category. Pollan cites a parallel example to that of the Burmese pythons in South Florida, writing about a herd of escaped goats on Wrightson Island that have decimated the local plant life. Pollan then goes on to attack the moral basis behind the idea of favoring individual animals over species, writing, “The story of Wrightson Island . . . suggests at the very least that a human morality based on individual rights makes for an awkward fit when applied to the natural world.” Pollan seems to imply that Singer and his ideological allies are likely to disagree with killing invasive animals, and simply by looking at the title of Singer’s chapter “All Animals Are Equal,” it is hard to disagree. In this case, Pollan’s arguments upend a significant implication of Singer’s application of utilitarian philosophy to animal rights. As a self-described utilitarian, Singer’s mission is to reduce the net suffering of individuals. However, by prioritizing the experiences of Burmese pythons in the Everglades, Singer’s strict adherence to utilitarian philosophy risks destroying an entire ecosystem. As Pollan’s argument shows, surely the rational move is to remove the invasive species and save the others.

However, even with this ethical principle in hand, watching the python hunters marvel at their catch does not feel guiltless. The hunters—who upload videos of their catches on *YouTube*, sport shirts that say “Feel the Burm” and “Snakeaholic,” and, in one shot, show the camera the snake’s jaws opening as they clutch its neck—are a far cry from Pollan and Singer’s carefully considered ethics. The hunters do make sure to say that “every single python that we take out is one less consuming our native wildlife, and that’s what it’s all about,” but this assertion comes only as a conclusion to their descriptions of the intensity and excitement of their innovative python catching techniques (Pythons 1:55). So, while the “snakeaholics” point to their ecological commitments, they simultaneously demonstrate that saving native wildlife is only one aspect of their rationale. The question, then, is one of motives. As established above, it is ethical to kill off invasive species that are causing immense suffering to other populations. But, what if those acting out this heavy decision are using it as cover to have fun, hunt without a license, and get featured as heroes on the local news?

This question brings up the interesting connection, or lack thereof, between action and motivation. To the ethicists Singer and Pollan, these aspects are far more tangential to each other than intrinsically linked. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer writes

ordinary human beings—not a few exceptionally cruel or heartless humans, but the overwhelming majority of humans—take an active part in, acquiesce

in, and allow their taxes to pay for practices that require the sacrifice of the most important interests of members of other species in order to promote the most trivial interests of our own species. (Singer 9)

Singer connects the active—“take an active part in”—and the passive—“acquiesce in, and allow their taxes to pay for”—placing them under the same unethical tent. It follows that this equivalence between actions taken with pure ethical motivations and those taken without them should extend to the inverse case of Singer’s. Thus, the python hunters act ethically even though ethics may not necessarily be their primary motivation. The hunters in this news clip, like most people, act for a multitude of reasons: payment, enjoyment, fame, maybe even a sense of duty to the environment. While the optics might not be great, when it comes to ethics the hunters’ internal motivations are irrelevant. People act for lots of reasons, and while sometimes the reasoning neatly aligns with the moral implications of their actions, it often does not. Even Peter Singer, ardent utilitarian and animal rights activist, agrees: if we want to judge actions, we need to look only at the results.

Pollan also attacks the connection between action and motivation but frames the dilemma differently. Rather than asking whether it matters if one acts with non-ethical motives, Pollan encourages his reader to consider situations where they may act while only partially considering the ethics of their behavior. Throughout “An Animal’s Place,” Pollan threads a personal anecdote of a dinner in which he eats a rib-eye steak while reading Singer’s pro-vegan article. At one point, Pollan writes about how he stops eating his steak, momentarily paralyzed by Singer’s persuasive arguments. Then Pollan writes, “If I believe in equality, and equality is based on interests rather than characteristics, then either I have to take the interests of the steer I’m eating into account or concede that I am a speciesist. For the time being, I decided to plead guilty as charged. I finished my steak” (Pollan). By restating Singer’s convincing arguments about speciesism, yet still eating his steak, Pollan seems to be blatantly disregarding the category of ethics altogether. However, by writing “for the time being,” Pollan hits on a powerful point. Pollan chooses to finish his steak not because he simply does not care about Singer’s arguments, but because he is confident that his lack of a fully formed argument is only temporary, and that he has ethical footing to stand on.

Similarly, the python hunters wrestle and kill the snakes not because they do not care about the ethical implications, but because they can justify their actions by relying on the half-baked claim that “every single python that we take out is one less consuming our native wildlife,” knowing that other ethicists (like Pollan) have done the ethical legwork for them (Pythons 1:55). This allowance for action based on partially developed ethical claims is slightly different from Singer’s answer, which relies on the idea that one’s rationale is totally distinct from one’s actions. Pollan, on the other hand, actually momentarily changes his actions due to his thinking, yet he continues, knowing that he has an ethical basis that can be developed later. Though

they tackle the separation between eventual action and prior ethical consideration differently, both of these approaches are essential to everyday life, at least for those who are uninterested in reading or writing treatises on utilitarian animal rights ideology. Like the python hunters and Pollan, people often rely on place-holding claims and proceed with actions anyway. Encouraging this kind of behavior is what allows society to progress, as people can better the world even while their actions and ethics are not exactly aligned.

As much as the local news clip depicts the python hunters as otherworldly heroic figures, they are surprisingly similar to most people in their ethical viewpoints, both in their shortcomings and their successes. In an ideal world, everyone would carefully consider each action before they take it, and then act only out of the purest motivations. However, like the python hunters exemplify, we can encourage people to act ethically, even if they lack or ignore a full sense of the ethical implications. If we wait around for some sort of ethical utopia, we won't make much-needed progress.

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PADLOCKS ON LITERACY: LANGUAGE VS. VERNACULAR MESHING

STEVEN WANG

From a young age, language was the tool of my trade, and I spent much of my life considering the power it held, the images it created, the emotions it evoked, the ideas it complicated. But before my first day of preschool, my Chinese mother told me something that would forever change my language, my *zhongwen*:

“Teacher at school help you with anything, no say *xiexie*, speak *thank you*. Bite on tongue for ‘th.’ Yes no say *ye-seu*, and *lotion* no say *loo-shin*. I don’t like *meiguo haizhimen* to make fun you.”

I nodded, though soon discovered that this would be easier said than done. The names on the cubbies, the anxious parents, my teacher’s first words in class... I mean, I could barely even understand Marissa’s temper tantrum in the other corner. English (no, *yingwen*) was something so incomprehensible to me, and while I remember other classmates getting teased for the way they spoke, I realized that, at the very least, they understood. They knew *yingwen*, when I knew nothing.

I am now a *University Writing* student, an essayist who is fluent but perhaps a bit ashamed to say that *yingwen* feels closer and closer to English each day. The fingers on my hands transformed from *yi dao shi* to one through ten. Meanwhile, I molded and kneaded myself into “Steven,” since *Luofan* (my real name) was too difficult to pronounce. The very *zhongwen* that inhabited my thoughts was replaced by an understudy I never intended to play the role. But the scary part: he was great at it. He got me friends, he got me grades, he got me into this college. He was *qiangda*, powerful, *mingzhi*, and exceedingly clever. He insidiously weaved his way into my life, as I let him strip my *zhongwen* identity away. But why wouldn’t I? As an American, *yingwen* was the *da’an*: the answer to my isolation.

I write this essay not to denounce *yingwen*’s entry into my life but to explain my response to the persistent debate on linguistic diversity in education. As a quadrilingual son of immigrants and now a linguistics major, I became a staunch supporter of linguistic diversity, despite being infected by *yingwen* throughout the years. While my mother always told me to blend in with the *meiguo haizhimen*, I prayed that someday students like me wouldn’t have to. And given the democratic ethos and liberal politics that inform our educational sphere, most teachers would probably agree, stating that “Yes, we accept everyone!” But in my experience, this is often accompanied by an unspoken caveat: “As long as we enforce *yingwen* over the non-standard.”

However, I begin my commentary with the egalitarian vision in mind: bring linguistic diversity into classrooms and mesh our divisive worlds into one. In part, I

echo what certain scholars have suggested for decades and now refer to as code-meshing, a style of blending vernaculars into standard English in the classroom. In “Casualties of Literacy,” the fifth chapter of his book *Your Average N****: Performing Race Literacy and Masculinity*, Vershawn Ashanti Young views it as so essential to the success of many Black students he must “ask how *not* code-meshing” (Young 111). To make a case for code-meshing Black English vernacular (BEV) with standard English (Young’s *yingwen*), Young recalls a disagreement with a colleague named Diane, a fellow Black instructor in favor of linguistic assimilation. Young explains that Diane not only disagrees with him, but in fact, claims that Young himself is an “an example” (107) of an assimilated Black man who is able to integrate into predominantly white institutions through his use of “formal” English, which she uses to discredit his approach of code-meshing (110). However, Young fervently disagrees with Diane’s use of his example as universal proof that the “traditional best practices” work (110) and rejects “Diane’s belief because it surrenders to prejudice” (108).

I read Young’s chapter nodding in agreement with him. Yet at the same time, as a second-generation immigrant and Spanish learner and speaker myself, I hadn’t expected to also relate so profoundly with Richard Rodriguez’s experiences, an author and intellectual Young disagrees with so much that he equates Diane’s conclusions directly to Rodriguez’s. In “Aria,” the first chapter of his autobiography *The Hunger for Memory*, Rodriguez vividly recounts his upbringing as a Spanish-speaking *immigrante Mexicano* in an English-speaking *sociedad blanca* as a critique of bilingual education. Growing up, Rodriguez’s family spoke *Español*, which created a sense of intimacy amidst “the experience of feeling apart from *los gringos*” (Rodriguez 16). He emphasizes how his family’s language *y palabras privadas* held not only textbook definitions but sound *y poder*, emotional “belong[ing]” and “relat[ions]” that made Spanish sacred (18). But most importantly, he illuminates how bringing *el idioma privado* into *el público* “reinforces feelings of public separateness,” and he even cites BEV (34). As opposed to Young, however, Rodriguez advocates assimilating the student in a way that makes him or her feel *enough* for the public. His meticulous use of anecdotes with “*inglés*” and “*los gringos*” surprisingly mirrored my experiences with *yingwen* and the *meiguo haizimen*, making Rodriguez ever more persuasive (13, 16). He left me empathetic and contemplative: *¿Es posible que la asimilación tenga la capacidad de cerrar la fisura entre nuestra nacionalidad y nuestra sangre?*

Now, perhaps the issue arises when I empathize with both Young *and* Rodriguez. Sure, the history of “grotesque caricature[s]” that “evidence black inferiority” during Reconstruction already proves how the weaponization of BEV is incontrovertible and a radical reintegration is necessary (Young 116-117). But the infiltration of “visitors” *públicos* (Rodriguez 21) into *la privada* and the transformation of Rodriguez to “*Road-ree-guess*” (27) also prove how linguistic integration strips a sense of cultural identity. The presence of two opposing yet valid status quos is the scholarly problem that we as readers must undertake, but how might we approach this dissonance?

Victor Villanueva—another scholarly opponent of Richard Rodriguez and author of “Whose Voice is it Anyway?”—provides a new distinction to view this situation. Villanueva differentiates the immigrant, someone who “cho[oses]” to leave a home country, from the minority, someone who was “forcibl[y] displac[e]d” and “coloniz[ed]” (18). With this distinction, Villanueva demonstrates that Rodriguez’s argument addresses the immigrant but ignores how “the immigrant could enter where the minority could not” (20). What Villanueva provides us is the possibility to consider Rodriguez as the immigrant and Young as the minority. But what does this mean for Rodriguez and Young linguistically?

My father always believed in the difference between immigrants and minorities. He was an old-fashioned Chinese immigrant who, despite the barrier of *yingwen*, was a studious engineer. But in his first few years in America, my father realized that his coworkers, who were largely Indian, spoke differently from him. Their syllabic rhythms and harsh “d”s and “t”s were prominent, but as minorities colonized by the British, they understood English perfectly, despite an altered vernacular. My father could only laugh: “Us immigrants, *women bu yiyang a* (we’re so different)! My coworkers speak a *fangyan*, a regional variation. We speak something brand new, no need compare, *la*.”

And perhaps I think about that last line a lot: “no need compare.” It reminds me of my first day of preschool, and the Black and brown kids who spoke differently but understood. I think that if my father read these three pieces, he would take Villanueva one step further, claiming that the immigrant and minority also coincide with a difference between language and vernacular. What does this mean? Well, Young argues for a *bi-vernacular* education and Rodriguez against *bilingual* education, so why must we fight head to head? Why are we creating “monolithic solutions” for different concepts (Young 111)? All I can do is laugh with my dad: “*Women bu yiyang a!*” “No need compare.”

I want to emphasize that, for the most part, we ought to praise Young’s side: Vernacular meshing is already a growing practice in modern pedagogy, and, perhaps, it’s working. But we have to realize that Young imports a fallacy into his argument. As a Black man, Young is a master of the BEV experience. What, however, does he really have to say about *la experiencia de un inmigrante Mexicano*? When Young states that “Rodriguez’s claim” is similar to “Diane[’s],” he clashes two worlds, comparing Rodriguez to Diane without considering their important differences (Young 110). This is not to say I fully agree with Rodriguez either. In fact, he imports the same *conflación*. Rodriguez extends his scope to include “black English” as something “inappropriate in classrooms” (33). Similar to Young, he considers the BEV debate in the context of his own *mundo* and attaches harsh labels of “inappropriate[ness]” (Rodriguez 33). This game of back-and-forth between Young and Rodriguez misses the point. Villanueva’s framework emphasizes how the Latino immigrant and Black minority *narrativos* cannot be fairly weighed against each other—and my father would have to agree.

We've made it this far, but how do we apply this distinction to how we educate? As an emerging linguist and *yingwen*-speaker, I have long pondered how we shift the paradigm. For Young, it seems easy: "Why should we expect anything different than hybrid speech and writing that mixes dialects anyway?" (121). We allow students to bring their mutually intelligible vernacular to the table, acknowledging how it has communicative power and *liliang* in its own right. This is the easier step. But we know it's *not* and *cannot* be the same for all languages. We cannot just blindly throw *Español* or *zhongwen* into the classroom and have educators learn them both. There is simply not enough time in the day. Even Villanueva agrees with Rodriguez that, in many ways, "bilingualism [or multilingualism] in the classroom [is] impractical" (20). But we can't segregate either; that "speaks of who's right and who's wrong, who holds the power" (Villanueva 21). Rather, we need to realize that language meshing cannot be integrated so easily but still can be through training and techniques from educators.

What does this look like? Well, one goal as an educator is to create a space where a non-English background does not inculcate a sense of original sin, where we don't "refash[ion] [students] into what" "the 'marketplace' demands" (Young 112). We have to take active steps to give power to *las diferencias*. We can't make assimilation about the replacement of language anymore. I personally relate to Rodriguez because, as a child, I wanted to fit in so badly that I misconstrued my dwindling *zhongwen* as a noble sacrifice. "There [was] more to assimilati[on] than learning the language," but a hijacking of my brain (Villanueva 19). I grew up within the rigidity of standard English, unable to even imagine that I would write a bilingual text such as this essay. But, we need to teach coexistence on the page, where we don't omit Gloria Anzaldúa or Amy Tan from the curriculum, and where *effective* language meshing is not swept under the formalisms of academia.

For monolingual educators, vernacular meshing might be within reach, but language meshing appears a daunting task. But rather than building a curriculum that teaches students how to speak and write their family's linguistic codes, all we want is for educators to teach how to investigate these codes to challenge hierarchies of power. And they don't need to be multilingual to do this.

Educators must not assume in us a deficiency in *yingwen* but encourage and recognize how we already engage in different linguistic codes, especially those disenfranchised by the standard. While Villanueva notes that Rodriguez wants "to be sensitive" and "forget about doing anything special," we can't just "sensitiv[ely]" stop in our tracks (Villanueva 17). It is not practical to give in to "inevitable pain" and allow *yingwen* to infect our lives the way it did in my youth (Rodriguez 27). For language, it's not about giving students "pen and paper" nor naïvely conflating it with vernacular as Young and Rodriguez do; rather, it is encouraging *y* providing examples of writing where we all understand-*nos* in *tebiede* and profoundly various ways, where our linguistic *diferencias no expanden* but guide our *shengyin*, our voices, to display the rich and *shenkede* backgrounds they contain (Villanueva 21). At first, it might sound a little crooked. It

might even seem a bit messy. But it's time for more educators to extend these theories to practice: It's time to remove the padlocks on our literacy.

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SIGNING THE UNSPEAKABLE: ON TRAUMA, RECOVERY, AND *DRIVE MY CAR*

JACOB CLAY

The world as I know it has dissolved.

“All trauma is preverbal,” writes Bessel van der Kolk (43). In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, he examines current scientific knowledge about the nature of PTSD and catalogues possible treatments for the disorder. “Victims of assaults and accidents sit mute and frozen in emergency rooms . . . photographs of combat soldiers show hollow-eyed men staring mutely into a void” (43). In 1994, van der Kolk and a team of researchers identified the neural substrate of this phenomenon: when patients were dissociating, Broca’s area—a portion of the brain that is necessary for generating language—was deactivated (43). Trauma, from this perspective, is a neurochemical response, not an external event, and the response is one of dissociation—what van der Kolk terms “the essence of trauma” (66). Some who experience potentially traumatic events don’t dissociate at all; others dissociate so severely that their memory of the event is obliterated along with the language they could use to describe it (192).

I clutch at words that crumble as I struggle to scramble out of this preverbal void.

Traumatized people fall silent for many reasons: some are rendered speechless during flashbacks; others become frustrated when they find that their speech is consistently disorganized (van der Kolk 43). Maya Angelou, famously, resigned herself to “muteness” (88). In her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she recounts that after her testimony against the man who raped her when she was a child led to his murder, she felt that her voice was too dangerous to be heard: “I had to stop talking” (87).

It is unsurprising, then, that in a film about the lead-up to and aftermath of a traumatic event, a non-speaking person should serve as the spiritual anchor. Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* tells the story of Yusuke Kafuku, an actor and director whose love for his wife Oto is matched only by his dedication to his red Saab 900. Oto, a screenwriter, dies suddenly after learning that Yusuke has discovered her affair with Koji Takatsuki, the young star of one of her films. In the wake of his wife’s death, Yusuke, who is starring in his own production of *Waiting for Godot*, finds himself speechless and unable to proceed with the performance. However, despite losing his ability to act, he keeps directing, and two years later he finds himself in Hiroshima staging a multilingual production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*. A phlegmatic perfectionist, he proceeds as methodically as ever: he travels from the island where he is lodged to Hiroshima each day in his precious Saab, reading lines from the play along with a tape his wife recorded for him. But instead of playing Vanya himself, he casts

the brash and impulsive Takatsuki in the role. The evolution of their relationship, and Yusuke's burgeoning friendship with Misaki, the driver that he is forced to accept for liability reasons—someone who, it is revealed, has suffered significant losses herself—are the focus of the remainder of the film.

Against this backdrop, the character Yoon-a, a non-speaking former dancer who turned to acting after being traumatized by a miscarriage, can seem extraneous. A cursory *Rotten Tomatoes* search reveals that only five out of forty-five top critics used the keywords “Yoon-a” or “sign language” in their review, and most of the few that did portrayed the use of the language as one of the film's many idiosyncrasies. Worse yet, because she is a “mute” character played by a speaking actor, Yoon-a could be construed as merely a metaphor for silence, trauma, and exclusion. However, a closer examination of her silences, and of the contradictory nature of silence itself, reveals that her role in the film is more than symbolic: her character arc traces the full path to recovery from trauma, a path on which her inability to speak is revealed to be an asset in disguise.

In the United States, speech is often associated with agency, personhood, and connection. Silence, as the absence of speech, is equated with powerlessness and disconnection. As prominent feminist Rebecca Solnit succinctly puts it, “words bring us together, and silence separates us” (18). In her essay “A Short History of Silence,” she reflects on the role that silence has played in the ongoing struggle for women's rights and concludes that it is inextricably bound up with oppression. Because their cries for help have not been heard, she laments, people who have been abused and subjugated stop talking, stop listening, and ultimately “hear no one, not even themselves . . . [they] have repressed, forgotten, buried the knowledge and thereby buried themselves” (Solnit 38).

I am left alone with only an echo of myself. The voices of others arrive as a sub-marine mumbling, as if resonating through the plexiglass barriers of an aquarium tank.

When oppression is presented as the only alternative, it seems reasonable and even admirable to demand speech. That is precisely what “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde did in her address “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (“Audre Lorde”). Following a surgery that could have marked the beginning of the end of her life, she implored her listeners to tell their stories: “In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my own mortality . . . what I regretted most were my silences . . . I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared” (Lorde 41).

This urgent need to speak spurs many traumatized people to assume what Delker et al. call a “survivor identity” (4). In their analysis of social perceptions of trauma in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, they identified three types of endings to trauma stories: negative, redemptive, and survivor identity. Survivors, in a modern American context, are those who tell their stories even and especially in the face of scorn and disbelief. In yet another example of speech as a form of connection, their

choice to do so is often motivated by their desire to serve others who have endured similar traumas (Delker et al. 4). As Solnit observes, “speaking up is . . . often an act of empathy” (38).

But telling difficult stories is more than just a service we provide to others. Rather, it is regarded as both the catalyst for and the proof of healing. Our cultural preference for people who speak, and speak with conviction, entices us into believing that despite the ineffability of trauma, verbalizing one’s feelings about traumatic events should lead to healing and reintegration. This belief, for which there is compelling but incomplete evidence, undergirds all traditional treatments for the disorder. The oldest and most famous of these treatments, of course, is psychotherapy, invented by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer in the late 19th century (van der Kolk 183). Talk therapy was invented when these two pioneers realized that recollecting the details of a traumatic event could relieve their patients’ “hysterical symptoms” (183).

Hand around throat, head against concrete, my roommate Simón spits poppy flowers that sprout crimson as they spatter my white clothes. . .

Undoubtedly, it is necessary to recall the specifics of a traumatic event in order to determine its lingering effects. But where does this leave Yoon-a? There has been no room for her in the conversation about *Drive My Car* up to this point. Even if she signs her story, she will usually need someone to translate and speak for her. Won’t the immediacy, and therefore the transformative power of telling, be lost?

The answer is a resounding no. We first hear Yoon-a’s backstory during a scene in which she and her husband Gong Yoon-soo, the dramaturg for the production of *Uncle Vanya*, host Yusuke and Misaki for dinner to apologize for the fact that they had concealed their marriage when she auditioned. Dressed in white, Yoon-a is initially presented as a symbol of fertility. The potatoes on the table, Yoon-soo is proud to note, were grown by her, and Yoon-a even jokes that one of the potatoes looks like him (1:22:45-1:23:05). But soon, the illusion is shattered: when Yusuke asks why she auditioned, she responds with a series of signs that concludes when she brings both hands before her womb, pushes one down and away, and solemnly bows her head. Her husband, after declining to translate her last sentence, reluctantly translates this one: “I got pregnant and took time off from dancing, but had a miscarriage.” She confesses that she turned to acting because her body “refused to dance.” Finally, she relaxes, and she joyfully shares that acting is bringing life to her body again. Her guests sit spellbound, clearly moved that someone could share such a story so forthrightly (1:25:05 – 1:27:53).

But Yusuke and Misaki also share their stories, and until those two stoic characters finally show emotion during the film’s closing scenes, they’re not transformed in the process. On the contrary, they seem to be stuck in cycles of repetition and self-hatred: Yusuke listens to his dead wife’s voice repeat the same lines in the same car on the same roads every single day; Misaki, in search of a way to escape the literal and

figurative wreckage of her personal life, flees to Hiroshima, of all places. The more they try to leave their pasts behind, the more their pasts define them.

I run, insensate, through the vibrating danger of boarded-up districts. Fear brings me back to life; adrenaline outraces memory.

“Freud,” writes Van der Kolk,

had a term for such traumatic reenactments: “the compulsion to repeat.” He and many of his followers believed that reenactments were an unconscious attempt to get control over a painful situation and that they eventually could lead to mastery and resolution. There is no evidence for that theory—repetition leads only to further pain and self-hatred. In fact, even reliving the trauma repeatedly in therapy may reinforce preoccupation and fixation (32).

Neuroscientist Ethan Kross captures this “preoccupation and fixation” in a single word: *Chatter*. In his 2021 book of the same name, he discusses some ways in which our thought patterns hold us in thrall and offers evidence-based strategies to help readers use their inner voices to their advantage. One of the findings he discovers most consistently in the scientific literature is that, paradoxically, repeatedly sharing negative experiences with others can actually intensify feelings of isolation (Kross 31).

Why, then, is Yoon-a’s story so transformative—not just for her, but for Yusuke and Misaki as well? One clue can be found in the nature of sign language itself: unlike speech, it demands full-body awareness and communication.

Breathing in, I know I’m breathing in ... Breathing out, I know I’m breathing out.

A fascination with the physicality of sign language led anthropologist Stephen C. Fedorowicz to a series of workshops at the Japanese Sign Language (JSL) Atelier in Hirakata. Knowing that deaf children in Japan were often forced to learn to speak by hearing teachers rather than taught sign language by Deaf ones, Fedorowicz was curious about the role that JSL played in initiating deaf people—that is, people who are clinically deaf—into the Deaf cultural community. The result was his 2019 paper “Performance, Sign Language, and Deaf Identity in Japan,” in which he argued that the performative aspect of sign language played a crucial role in the development of Deaf personal and cultural identity. In one workshop, many deaf participants were actually criticized for signing a story in a way that too closely mimicked Signed Japanese, a derivative language that is considered inauthentic and unimaginative. The instructor, on the other hand, “stressed the importance of imagery and everyday experience” when using JSL and used a variety of facial expressions to keep his viewers engaged (Fedorowicz).

And it turns out that being physically connected to the emotional content of a painful story is far more important from a therapeutic perspective than simply telling the story out loud. “Recollection without affect,” note Freud and Breuer, “invariably produces no result” (van der Kolk 184). Paradoxically, then, Yoon-a’s “muteness”

forces her to tell her story in a more productive way. Instead of recounting the events stone-faced, her communication has to be grounded in physical awareness.

As I sit, aware of my body, I stop trying to find the words to tell my story. And all of a sudden, the words appear: my roommate went off his medications and attacked me; I was trapped with him for the rest of the term. Nothing less, and nothing more. Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in; breathing out, I know I'm breathing out.

In order to understand Yoon-a's significance in *Drive My Car*, we must understand Japanese cultural attitudes toward silence. In a now-published talk entitled "A Deep Sense of Human Value," Zen master Katagiri Roshi employed a word that expresses the essence of those attitudes: *mokurai* (63). "*Moku*" he said, "means silence, and *rai* means thunder . . . So you are silent, but simultaneously there are many words, many explanations, and many representations there . . . there is an enormous voice like thunder there" (63).

Submerged in silence, sensations alone are now enough. As I stop running from my memories and trying to return to my former self, I surrender to a much larger sense of self, one that is by nature in flux, impermanent, and insubstantial, ready to change at any instant.

During a scene in which the cast of *Uncle Vanya* rehearses outside in a shady grove, we witness how acting is revitalizing Yoon-a. After weeks of forbidding his actors to show emotion, Yusuke finally allows them to perform, at which point Yoon-a does something radical: she improvises. In a scene between Sonya, played by Yoon-a, and Yelena, played by Chinese-American cast member Janice, Yelena confesses her misery and bemoans, "Happiness, for me, doesn't exist in this world." Then, upon seeing Sonya's reaction, she stops short. "Why are you laughing?" she asks. "I'm happy," Sonya signs. "I'm just so happy." Yelena grins, turns away, and shakes her head, bemused; "I want to play the piano now," she pines. Suddenly, Yoon-a picks up a leaf from the ground and presents it to Janice. "Do play," she urges, wrapping her arms around her from behind (1:53:10-1:53:50). This small gesture, a gift of vitality and presence, breathes new life into their performance, and the monotony of the film is finally broken.

The veil that separated me from reality has been lifted: before, I felt that the wind was blowing; now, I feel the wind blowing; I relax and feel its coolness against my skin.

So far, all of our attempts to understand Yoon-a's transformative power have required an analysis of language, whether voiced or unvoiced. But because trauma is preverbal, communication between traumatized people must ultimately transcend language.

What does this look like in theory? It entails, to borrow a phrase from film theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, "speaking nearby." "Speaking nearby," according to the description from a museum exhibition on the topic, "sets itself apart from 'speaking about;' it refers to an indirect form of speaking that does not objectify topics and subjects but reflects upon itself and is capable of approaching topics and subjects from up close" ("Migration: Speaking Nearby"). Just as when resting in physical awareness,

when speaking nearby, the distinction between subject and object—those interlocking gears that set all language in motion and give rise to the notion of the “other”—can fade away. In other words, it is unnecessary to speak about trauma in order to “speak” nearby it.

What does it look like in practice? Yoon-a demonstrates best. With Misaki in the audience, she delivers the monologue we have heard Yusuke’s wife repeat so many times during his long, monotonous drives. In it, Sonya encourages Vanya—played, in the end, by Yusuke himself—not to lose hope.



Fig 1. “*Drive My Car* Scene.” *YouTube*. 2021.

I watch this scene tranquil and whole, once more at a loss for words, but this time free from fear. Yoon-a is not signing for Yusuke, nor is she signing to him; she is signing with and nearby him. At once, five dimensions are collapsed into none: the distance between Yoon-a, Sonya, Yusuke, Vanya, Misaki, and us is dissolved. In a film that chronicles the collective isolation of its speaking characters, we finally have preverbal communion: characters, actors, and audience merge in a shared experience, a oneness that exists beyond words, beyond signs, beyond stories; now safe, we can reclaim the void.

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WILL SMITH SLAPPED CHRIS ROCK, BUT CHRIS ROCK DELIVERED A BLOW TO ALL BLACK WOMEN

AIDAN WALKERYEE

After two decades of decline, the 2022 Oscars' viewership was almost at an all-time low (Stoll). Suddenly viewership increased by a staggering 555,000 people (Hsu). The catalyst for this sudden jump was Will Smith casually strolling onstage and slapping Chris Rock in the face on live TV. It was in response to a joke that Chris Rock made about Will Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith. After returning to his seat, Smith even followed the slap by shouting, "Keep my wife's name out your fucking mouth" (Stevens). When the "Slap Story" broke, it seemed to eclipse even the initial media response to the invasion of Ukraine. Instantly pop culture references and thousands of memes were created. In the torrent of op-eds about the incident, most writers focused on the slap and the lasting impacts it would have ranging from how the slap reinforced stereotypes for Black people (Capehart) and women (Abdul-Jabar), set a violent precedent for comedians (Lang), and even how it toxically portrayed violence as an "act of love" (Marples). Others even applauded it, like Tiffany Haddish who stated, "That meant the world to me. And maybe the world might not like how it went down, but for me, it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" (Patterson and McNiece). The slap was constantly discussed and stayed in the news cycle for weeks. Even at the Grammys, the slap was still being heavily referenced. Trevor Noah joked we will be "keeping people's names out of our mouths," while Questlove stated, "All right, I am going to present this award and I trust that you people will stay 500 feet away from me" (Sharf). We all saw or heard about the slap that reverberated throughout the world, but what about the joke?

For all of the mainstream media coverage and conversation about the incident, the joke itself got relatively little coverage. Most people agreed that Rock handled the slap unbelievably professionally. While this was undoubtedly a positive thing, it also resulted in many focusing on the immorality of the slap rather than the possible immorality of the joke. A headline in the *Hindustan Times* said it best: "Chris Rock's joke was bad, Will Smith's reaction worse" (Mathur). This was something I initially fell victim to as well.

On the surface, the joke is benign. Rock simply said, "'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it, all right?" "G.I. Jane 2" was an allusion that compared Pinkett Smith to the strong female lead and heroine in *G.I. Jane*, who was played by the conventionally beautiful, white actress Demi Moore (Davies, Gleiberman). Given this comparison, it could very reasonably be taken as a compliment. One commenter on the movie reviewing platform *MovieChat* claimed, "If anything, the *G.I. Jane* comment was kinda

a compliment.” Chris Rock also prefaced the joke with “Jada, I love you,” while using a relatively endearing tone to further add to the benign nature of the joke.

Others saw it as less benign. Monica Hesse from the *Washington Post* opens her article about the incident with, “Chris Rock made a bad joke about Jada Pinkett Smith. Unfortunately, her husband’s offense became the story.” Even given Hesse’s opening, she focuses largely on the slap, something the media as a whole had fallen victim to as well. When the joke’s morality is briefly questioned, those critiques were focused on Pinkett Smith’s disease, alopecia areata, which causes hair loss. This was a common theme among the articles and opinion papers criticizing the joke.

Of course, many people were quick to dismiss the discussion and said there was no harm in the joke. A common argument against caring about and evaluating the morality of the joke is that it’s in fact “just a joke” or that “it wasn’t [that] bad” (Krol). To adjudicate between these claims of morality we can turn to Robin Tapley, a humor ethicist. In Tapley’s essay “Just Joking: The Ethics of Humor,” she calls into question the “idea that because we are ‘just joking’ we can say anything whatsoever with moral immunity” (181). In Rock’s case, many people give him an extraordinary amount of moral immunity because he is a professional comedian at the Oscars. It is very clear he is making a joke and it is part of his job to make these jokes which further solidifies his moral immunity. Tapley challenges this moral immunity by asserting, “Jokes have an intimate connection with our beliefs, our knowledge, and our interpretation of the world. Jokes have the power to reinforce, promote, or challenge our way of thinking” (172). This direct influence jokes have on our beliefs means that jokes can spread and perpetuate ideas the same way any other speech can and does. It also prompts us to look at what possible beliefs are being conveyed or reinforced by the jokes.

The public largely focused only on how the beliefs conveyed by the joke were benign, potentially problematic because it was about a disease, or that it was simply “just a joke.” However, focusing only on these categories distracts from where the joke was most likely to do harm, that is, to whom the joke was targeted: at a Black woman, her appearance, and even more specifically, her hair. Hair has long been an integral part of a Black person’s identity as well as a target of much scrutiny. As an article titled “Tangled Roots: Decoding the History of Black Hair” explains, “In pre-colonial African societies, Black hair was seen as a symbol of a person’s identity... But when the transatlantic slave trade began, these traditions were erased, and a new set of meanings were imposed onto Black people’s hair, particularly by white slave owners” (Bero). Throughout history and the present day, Black hair has been villainized, likened to animals, and labeled inferior and dirty in its natural form while called ugly and masculine in its shorter forms when worn by women (Bero).

These anti-Black hair stereotypes are so ingrained and influential in our society that they affect the livelihood and ability of Black people, and especially Black women, to support themselves and their families financially. A study conducted at multiple universities and on multiple hiring platforms and agencies found that “Black women

with natural hairstyles were perceived to be less professional, less competent, and less likely to be recommended for a job interview than Black women with straightened hairstyles and White women with either curly or straight hairstyles.” (Koval and Rosette) This issue is so widespread that recently in March of 2022 the CROWN Act was elevated to the House of Representatives and successfully passed. The CROWN Act “ban[s] race-based hair discrimination at work, federal programs and public accommodations” (Diaz). Issues like these don’t often get legislation dedicated to them unless there are numerous studies backing them, on top of lots of advocacy work. Even with legislation like the CROWN Act and advocacy, in order to erase the effects of institutional discrimination, we must work to rectify them socially as well.

Chris Rock himself has shown the public how Black hair is represented and perceived in a more personal context. In 2009 he made a documentary about Black hair titled *Good Hair* in response to his daughter’s feeling of inferiority caused by her Black hair. In *Good Hair*, Sheila Bridges, a Black woman, states:

I have alopecia [the condition Pinkett Smith has], which causes hair loss on your head or on your body. I chose not to wear a wig for a number of reasons. There’s this feeling of hiding and I never wanted to feel like I was hiding something. You are sort of accepting who you are and looking in the mirror and feeling as though you’re beautiful and doing it. So I think the reason hair is so important is because our self-esteem is wrapped up in it. It’s like a type of currency for us, even though those standards are completely unrealistic and unattainable, especially for Black women. (1:04:57)

Good Hair is filled with powerful anecdotes like Bridges’. These anecdotes, on top of Rock’s lived experiences, gives him the ability to understand the stigmatization Black people’s appearances have endured, as well as the resulting shame and unequal treatment that come from it. These unattainable standards projected onto Black women are largely damaging not just to their self-esteem but also to their self-worth. Issues of self-worth are especially important in the Black community, which has and is still largely being degraded.

Black women’s appearance and self-esteem have historically been targeted in many ways. One such method is their being labeled as masculine. Unfortunately, a large number of people still wield this stereotype with reckless abandon. Reactions to people like Michelle Obama and Serena Williams illustrate this fact very clearly. Far-right political commentator Alex Jones states, “Michelle appears in photos and videos to have a very large penis in her pants, her shoulders are wide, her face is very, very masculine” (Farand). Comments like these are not limited to hecklers or entertainers; even government officials feel comfortable participating in this rhetoric. Pamela Ramsey Taylor, the director of the Clay County Development Corporation tweeted, “It will be refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady in the White

House. I'm tired of seeing a [sic] Ape in heels" (Chan). While these comments may seem disturbing and surprising, they are not new, and Williams is not treated any better. Even people who watch her claim victory after victory make comments comparing her to a gorilla and calling her "unbelievably dominant . . . and manly" (Desmond-Harris). Similar to Michelle Obama, Williams is targeted by those in official positions of power. "In 2014, a high-ranking Russian tennis official snarkily referred to Serena and her sister Venus as 'the Williams brothers'" (Kendall). This ridicule doesn't only happen to hugely successful and high-profile Black women; the everyday Black woman is targeted too. In Hannah Eko's *Buzzfeed* article titled "As A Black Woman, I'm Tired of Having to Prove My Womanhood," she speaks about her experiences of being masculinized and made to feel less than. "For over a decade, I've had experiences like these: public instances where I have been mistaken for a man . . . I'm always left disoriented, wondering which fragment of my identity was responsible for the misdirected sir, the muffled joke." These "muffled jokes" can stem from unmuffled ones like Rock's. An unintentional and unfortunate undertone of Rock's joke is the masculinization of Pinkett Smith. Tim Grierson, a film and pop culture journalist, writes about *G.I. Jane's* haircutting scene as "she shaves off her long hair, symbolically demonstrating she's just like the men." With the scene's symbolism so clearly intended to represent a masculine transformation and not one of traditional beauty, Rock's joke inherently conveys the same sentiment.

It is especially potent and damaging when these two masculine stereotypes of short hair and Blackness are used in conjunction to dehumanize their target, something not uncommon. Disturbing messages leaked from a Columbia University wrestling team group chat from 2014 illustrate how easily this can occur. Members wrote to one another: "you fucked a bald black girl so you came out like 2 months ago," and "How big was her dick," while multiple members upvoted such comments ("Messages Reveal Culture of Intolerance"). Even further, the article about the messages and those much worse were met with mixed reactions. There were hundreds of comments denouncing these sentiments but also hundreds defending the messages saying things like "they aren't that bad" or "they should be protected under the 1st amendment" ("Messages Reveal Culture of Intolerance"). Comments like these downplay the harm ideas like these can cause in a community or shift the conversation away from the issues brought up that need to be addressed. The stigmatization of Black hair in all forms is widespread and affects the mental health and well-being of Black people everywhere.

Jokes like Rock's, which are broadcast in front of millions of people, must be looked at with extra caution. These jokes have the ability to spread large amounts of what Tapley calls "social harm . . . harm which affects a group or members of a group that makes up our society" (179). There is a difference between making a possibly harmful joke to a few people and to millions. While both are still harmful, a joke to millions of people has the potential to disseminate the idea to a larger audience. The magnitude of caution we have to use is directly proportional to the size of the platform

one has. Rock's joke targeted at Pinkett Smith could unintentionally perpetuate the downplaying of Black women's issues on the whole, especially in regards to hair, and end up inflicting this "social harm" on a massive scale.

During an episode of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Maher jokes about Pinkett Smith saying, "I mean, [it's] alopecia, it's not leukemia" (Rowley). Comments and jokes like these, even when unintentionally prompted by Rock's joke, convey harmful ideas. The idea of downplaying and mishandling Black people and women's health issues is nothing new and is systematically embedded in our everyday lives. Doctors significantly downplay or underestimate Black people's pain when compared to non-Black people citing common stereotypes like "black people's skin is thicker than white people's skin" (Hoffman et al.). This underestimation of pain is something that multiple studies have shown (Hoffman et al.). On a larger scale, Black women deal with a wholly unequal healthcare system that doesn't treat them as effectively. This disparity has led to a three-year shorter life expectancy when compared with their white counterparts (Chinn, Martin, and Redmond). Black women also have significantly higher maternal death rates, in some cases up to five times higher, when compared to white women, another result of this healthcare inequity (MacDorman et al.).

So if Rock's joke brings with it such dangerous implications and potential harm, why would he think it was okay? We will first look at his perspective as a comedian. The joke was something comedians call crowd work, where the comedian interacts and makes jokes with and about the crowd in an unscripted manner (Zinoman). In this sort of freestyle comedy, it is easy to make jokes with one intention but have them end up having unintentional implications. The amount of benign intent contained by the joke and its preface means Rock likely meant it as a relatively positive *G.I. Jane* joke, rather than one that targets a Black woman's beauty, namely her hair. Furthermore, even if Rock realized the underlying target of the joke, there is another reason he may have felt willing to make the joke.

Once again we can look to Tapley, who uses a claim from LaFollette and Shanks, two other humor scholars, to explain the relationship between the teller and a joke's material. "[O]ne needs a 'psychic distance' from the beliefs to find humour in [it]" (174). This "psychic distance" is the separation one feels from a topic. For example, people who hear a 9/11 joke who were directly affected by it are less likely to find the joke funny when compared with someone who was unaffected or not alive when the attack occurred. This psychic distance is something that Rock arguably does not have. So then how does this apply to our situation? I would actually look at the opposite side of this concept to explain the joke. Rock's close psychic proximity actually allowed him to feel comfortable making the joke and finding humor in it. Rock's joking in this instance feels similar to when someone jokes about those closest to them, but won't allow others to make the same jokes targeting the same people. Namely, Rock being a Black person himself along with his familiarity and work (*Good Hair*) to better the

perception and understanding of Black hair may have led him to believe the joke was benign as long as he is the one who said it.

But was it? Tapley also discusses the moral implications of the joke teller's identity and status when defining a morally objectionable joke. In order for a joke to be morally objectionable, there must be a "social disparity" where "the teller of a joke has a voice, and the target does not (or at least not an equally powerful voice by virtue of membership in a particular group)" (182). Some of the difficulty with this criterion is that it can be hard to determine who is in the more socially vulnerable position and even if you can, by how much does one need to be advantaged to make the joke immoral? Rock sees himself as a part of the "Black in-group" along with Pinkett Smith, thus stopping the joke from being morally objectionable. Rock also sees Pinkett Smith as a rich actress married to Will Smith, which puts her at one of the highest social standings possible. It's understandable why he may have thought he was punching up, that is, joking about someone is a higher social position than him.

But the joke wasn't just between them. Targeting Pinkett Smith herself may not cause a greater social harm, but it also targets those she represents, Black women, which is how this joke can cause serious social harm. Rock may have had only the best intentions when he made the joke, but even given those intentions, he couldn't control the repercussions of his joke. These effects are out of his control and connect back to the size of his platform. There are many people who heard the joke and gleaned nothing from it, but there are also many who are more than happy to weaponize it, something that is completely out of Rock's control. A study done by researchers at multiple universities found that "disparagement humor fosters discrimination against groups for whom society's attitudes are ambivalent" (Ford et al. 178). While Rock's joke is not outright disparagement humor, it could be used to inspire and confirm the negative beliefs that motivate disparagement humor toward Black women and Black hair. As we've seen from the multiple examples of negative attitudes toward Black women, their hair, and their appearance, there's already way too much of that.

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(ART)IFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

JESSICA ZHANG

The *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* looks like it could *almost* be framed in a museum. The painting depicts a portly gentleman wearing a dark frock coat and a plain white collar, perhaps the attire of a clergyman. It would be a very dignified composition, except for the fact that the artwork appears unfinished—the facial features are blurred, large swaths of canvas remain unpainted, and up close, the paintwork becomes a grid of mechanical-looking dots, resembling pixels. Even more strangely, in place of the artist’s signature, a cursive script scrawls out what appears to be an algebraic formula (see fig. 1).

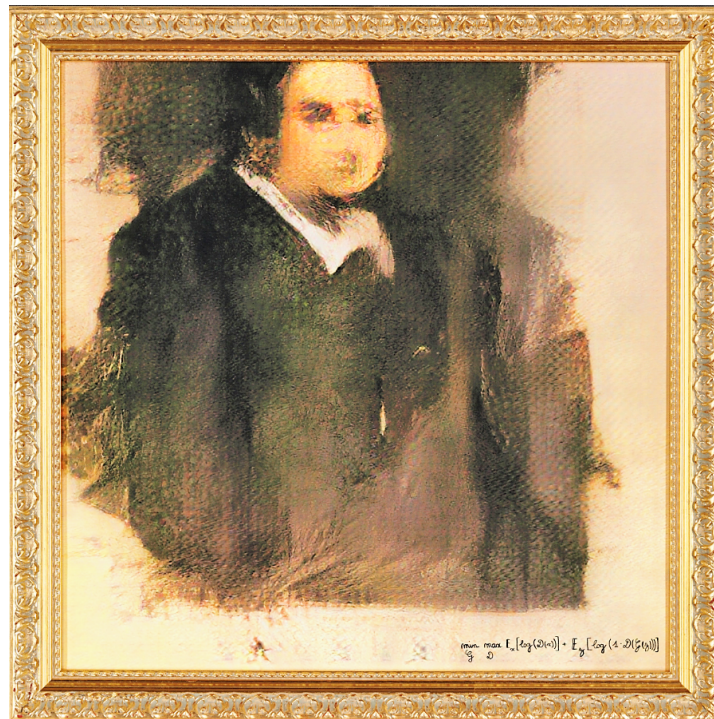


Fig. 1. *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*. 2018.

As one may have guessed, this portrait was not a product of the human mind. Rather, it was created by an artificial intelligence using the formula at the bottom right corner. When the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* went under the hammer in Christie’s *Prints & Multiples* sale on October 25, 2018, it sold for an incredible \$432,500, signaling the arrival of AI art to the international auction stage (“Is Artificial Intelligence Set to Become Art’s Next Medium?: Christie’s”). The sale, however, sparked immediate controversy, and art admirers around the world all asked the same question: should the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*, and other computer-generated artwork, be considered art?

To art connoisseurs who value the stirring emotions behind each painting over its technicality, the answer was no. True art—or at least art worthy of nearly half a million dollars—is about passionate human expression, epitomized in the masterpieces of “geniuses” like Leonardo DaVinci and Vincent Van Gogh. According to Jonathan Jones, an art critic for *The Guardian*, “Computers would need to replicate human consciousness before they could replicate the funny thing humans do called ‘art’” (“A Portrait Created by AI”). He argues that because AIs are incapable of emotion, they cannot meaningfully replicate certain qualities that old masterpieces, such as the *Mona Lisa* (1503) or *Starry Night* (1889), do so well—and that if they eventually can, it would certainly mean the doom of both artistic expression and humanity. Such fear prevents serious discussion, and with many professional painters expressing the concern that computers will put them out of work, we might expect that computer-generated art would only reinscribe the established divisions between the mechanical and the creative. However, in a world governed by the new aesthetics born from digitalization, technology has already revolutionized the art market in numerous ways: it has provided artists with a versatile medium and a way to gain visibility, and has given art enthusiasts access to a wider range of art, reshaping the way the public interacts with it. By allowing technology to contribute to a creative production with a higher degree of autonomy, computer-generated art not only further blurs the boundaries between technology and art, providing new insights into how traditional elements of visual art may take form in new technological media, but also enables a new artistic style that eschews categorization, fusing a wide range of pictorial conventions into surprising new forms.

Contrary to what some skeptical art critics believe, AIs that create art are more than capable of having original artistic vision. Such algorithms are called creative adversarial networks (CANs), a term coined by Ahmed Elgammal, the director of the Art and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at Rutgers University. Critics such as Jones often use the fact that CANs are trained on data sets of existing artworks to make the case that AIs can only mimic art, but otherwise don’t have the capacity to produce powerful stimuli in art such as novelty or surprise. However, this objection is a grave misunderstanding of the nature of CANs and intelligent machines. Perhaps no one would better enumerate the diversity of computer behavior than the father of modern-day computer science, Alan Turing, one of the first scientists to explore the possibility of creating a machine capable of human-like intelligence. In his article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” Turing points out the fallacies in the idea that machines “can ‘never do anything really new’ . . . can never ‘take us by surprise’” (450). Turing states that this view emerges from the mistaken assumption that “as soon as a fact is presented to a mind all consequences of that fact spring into the mind simultaneously with it” (451). In other words, he argues against the idea that the output of a program can always be determined by the input. In fact, with intelligent machines, because it is impossible for the programmer to know the state of the machine at each moment of the computation, the program more often than not produces a result that is

unintentional or unpredictable. The programmers of CANs take advantage of this uncertainty to ensure that the algorithms produce novelty, something different from the images in the training data set, through what Turing calls a “random element” (459). In the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*, we see the random element take effect in the indistinctness of Edmond de Belamy’s facial features, portraying the subject in a manner that departs from the conventional depictions of 18th-century portraits. There is something weirdly contemporary in the deliberate distortion of Edmond’s face, and the abstract styles present in many other computer-generated artworks seem to suggest that AIs tend to produce works that mirror the course of art history—art’s long progression from figuration to abstraction. What critics fail to understand is that the purpose of CANs studying patterns in existing artworks is not to generate images consistent with such art, but to search for ways to transpose the imagery from the mix of influences into new works where color and form undergo reassessment. The greatest space for novelty, for computers and humans alike, lies in the potential future trends, in the unseen, and with AIs seemingly able to model art’s trajectory from the traditional to the new, it’s likely that the next original artistic movement will be born from computer-generated art.

Unfortunately, the new is often seen as a threat to the old, and the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*, as a product of art and science in conjunction, poses a challenge to the traditional idea of the “artistic genius.” Artistic genius has long been believed to be epitomized by the masterpieces of the greats, which many regard as shining representations of the ideals from their respective periods, from the Renaissance to Romanticism to Surrealism. While many art movements coincided with significant advancements in mathematics and sciences and often drew inspiration from such events, the emphasis of these great works typically lies in their imaginative qualities. For instance, Romantic art often delves into transcendental themes, while Surrealist art features dreamlike imagery. Consequently, the concepts of art and inspiration are often spoken of in mystical terms, elevated to a status beyond the realm of science and technology. In fact, the claim that Johannes Vermeer, the artist who famously painted the *Girl with A Pearl Earring* (1665), used some sort of optical device and mirror technology to help accurately recreate scenes within his paintings caused deep anguish for many art historians and critics, who accused the allegation of being “a depressing attempt to reduce genius to a trick” (Jones, “DIY Vermeer Documentary”). What, then, constitutes this so-called “genius”?

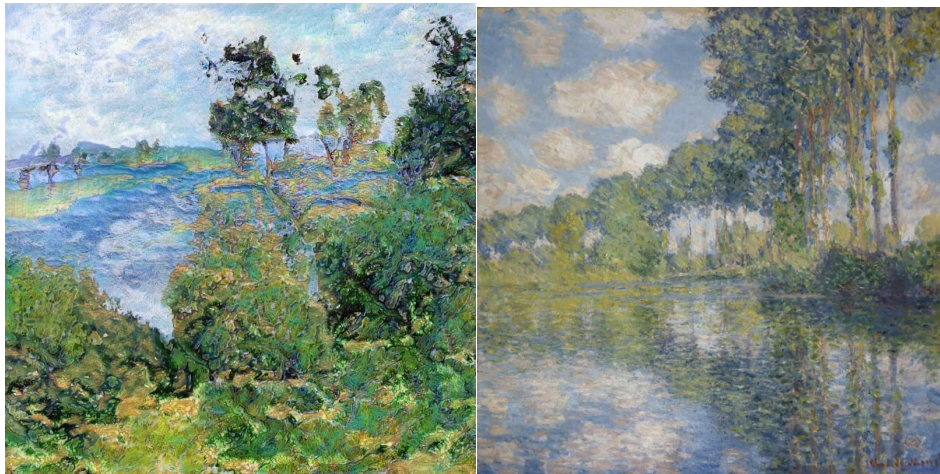
For centuries of art education, the “artistic genius” trope has always consisted of the Western canon of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Claude Monet, and Johannes Vermeer, an understanding so closely linked to the privileges and traits associated with whiteness and masculinity that it suggests the very notion of “genius” is socially constructed. Ian Hacking explains in his essay “Making Up People” that it is human nature to classify things, though the act of classification in many cases “breeds conceptual confusion,” referring to how we have difficulty giving just

consideration to observed behaviors that do not conform to our understanding of something. He laments that in attempting to measure genius through statistical means such as the IQ test, we have in turn abolished genius from our society. Hacking makes an argument against our classification of genius, yet ironically, in the process, he implies that true genius is to be associated with the great eras of art, reaffirming the idealized classification of “genius” that many critics of AI art use to prevent computer-generated artwork from being considered art. The idea that artistic genius is a valid classification, however, directly contradicts Hacking’s point about “real” and “finite” kinds. Hacking brings up John Stuart Mill’s argument that a “real kind” is a classification in which the members have “innumerable features in common,” while a “finite kind” is a classification in which members have very little in common. For example, our species, the *homo sapiens*, is a real kind because we share many biological features and characteristics, whereas races are just finite kinds because members of different races have only their race as a commonality. Upon close examination, the old masters regarded as artistic geniuses have few similarities; the diverse range of styles and expressive manifestations that their artworks contain reflects their existence as subjects of different social and cultural settings, artistic training, and schools of thought. “Artistic genius” is therefore merely a finite kind, making the current definition of “greatness” in art less about the aesthetics of the work produced or even the intentions behind the work, and more about whiteness, elitism, maleness, and Eurocentricity. The underlying issue is that “artistic genius” has long been centered on the mythos of the artists rather than the artworks themselves, a fact that has almost always worked against women and artists of color and now works against artificial intelligences. Any divergence from reality in the artist’s depiction tends to hold significance, but only if that artist is a man.¹ For instance, the distortions within the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* greatly resemble Glenn Brown’s art-historical appropriations (“Biography”), yet while Glenn Brown’s art is praised for its technical virtuosity and passion, the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* is unfairly condemned to be a poor pastiche of genius.

To overcome this bias requires seismic social shifts, a reangling of how we view art history—as a history of the art, rather than of the artists. In “Automating Gender,” Jack Halberstam encourages us to confront our pre-existing ideas regarding Western society’s grand narratives, which in art is the myth that there are near-deities of creative wisdom, a superior kind of humanity that lives a more rarified human experience—white, European male artists. The prevalence of this myth, endorsed by art historians and art critics, places the works of “artistic geniuses” in the highest realm of art, not only establishing the legitimacy of these art historians and critics as experts in their knowledge of such art, but also guaranteeing the status of the artists of those works as old masters, perpetuating a gendered tautology that the artistic genius is male because men are most fit to be artistic geniuses. Through the lens of postmodernism, which Halberstam defines as a movement “embedded within the modern as interference or

interruption and as a coming to consciousness of a subject no longer modeled upon the Western white male,” Halberstam affirms that questioning the interests served by the perpetuation of such grand narratives will lead to the conclusion that the ideas of artistic genius related to the allures of the great European art periods are unprogressive (446). From the politics of artificiality provided by postmodernism, it follows that “genius” is a socially manipulated idea that actually keeps us from getting a better understanding of the artworks studied and from exploring new avenues in art. Historical emphasis must be returned to the art rather than the artist. If we focus on the artwork created by CANs rather than the mechanical nature of the CANs themselves, perhaps we can see computer-generated art as less of a challenge to the prestige of human-made art, and more as a new artistic manifestation that subverts common distinctions between art and technology, the creative and the mechanical, and the old and the new.

In this sense, if we no longer focus on the mind or, particularly, the body behind a work, we might discover that the artworks created by CANs are just as impactful as artwork created by humans. Perhaps in this case we should also look to Turing for inspiration, and replace the question under consideration, “Can computers create art?”, with another: “Could a computer create artwork that could successfully trick a human into thinking it was created by another human?” If a satisfactory play of the Turing test, a test designed to see if an evaluator can distinguish between a human and machine through conversation, is enough to argue that machine intellect can be comparable to man’s, then a way to prove that computer-generated art is comparable to human art, surely, is to conduct a kind of visual Turing test, to show the output of the algorithms to human evaluators and ask if they can tell the difference (see figs. 2-3).



Figs. 2-3. Barrat, Robbie. 2018. Monet, Claude. *Poplars on the Epte*, 1891.

In fact, Ahmed Elgammal conducted a survey among viewers in a gallery specifically arranged for a visual Turing test, where computer-generated art was presented alongside human art. He found that many had a difficult time distinguishing

between human art and computer-generated art, with several even claiming to be more inspired by the art done by a machine (“AI is Blurring the Definition of Artist”). The results of the poll affirm that the identity of a creator does not inherently grant more value to a work, and show that AIs are more than capable of creating aesthetic and thought-provoking works of art. Moreover, computer-generated artworks like the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* are in high demand by contemporary art enthusiasts, as evidenced by the passionate reception of the portrait and the final dealing price of nearly 5 times the price of an Andy Warhol print at the same auction. Both factors prove that computer-generated art can be just as artistically and socially meaningful as traditional art.

The success of the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* demonstrates that the future of art is now intertwined with the future of technology. New technologies not only benefit art critics and art historians, forcing them to reevaluate their preconceived notions of “artistic genius,” but also benefit art and artists, creating new tools and modes of expression. What people who worry that AI art is a harbinger of humanity’s destruction often forget is that there are humans behind the machines, a creator behind another creator of art. All computer-generated art is the result of human invention, software development, and other kinds of authorship. We must acknowledge that the human is always the creative force behind the work and that the computer is really just a helpful tool, albeit a little more complicated than a canvas and a paintbrush. But even if that were not true—even if AIs created art with complete independence and autonomy—the value of their work would not change. Technological development stimulates so much of the continued vitality of art, and new AI algorithms like CANs are just another means by which artists can transform art in positive ways, just as so many other technologies have in the past.

NOTE

1. It’s important to note that there have been exceptions within the realm of human artists: exceptional individuals like Basquiat or Sofonisba, who are widely regarded as “artistic geniuses” despite deviating from conventional artistic norms, have made groundbreaking contributions to the world of art. The recognition and appreciation of their work has enriched our understanding of art, and highlights the importance of acknowledging and celebrating diverse talents in art, regardless of the nature of the artists.

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THE KOREAN ZOMBIE: WHY WE WON'T STOP FIGHTING

ANDREW S. KIM

In April of 2022, [Chan-Sung Jung](#), also known as “The Korean Zombie,” became the first Korean to compete in an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) [main-event fight](#). After over a decade of trying to reach this point in his career, Jung finally got the chance to fight for a championship belt that he could proudly bring home to South Korea. Filled with pride and excitement, I had a live watch party on Zoom with seven of my Korean friends spread out across the world.

He lost. However, Jung survived a grueling four rounds against the best pound-for-pound fighter in the UFC, Australian [Alexander Volkanovski](#), until he was forcefully stopped by the referee in a technical knockout (TKO). This was far better than expected. Looking at the [betting odds](#) before the fight, you would’ve wanted to bet on Jung being knocked out in the first round.

In other words, Jung was seen as an easy opponent, an easy target, even though he had proved himself a great fighter over a decade of wins. Although Jung may have lost the fight, it is the way he fought that makes him a winner to me and many other Koreans. While most fights end with the opponent on the floor via knockout or submission, the fight was stopped by the referee while Jung was still standing. He had taken many critical blows to the head but refused to go down, so the referee had to make a decision to end the fight to prevent long-term damage.

As a young Korean athlete myself, I have always looked up to Jung as someone who has met adversity with unwavering determination to prove his doubters wrong. In a combat sport that [Asians aren’t “supposed” to be good at](#), he fought his way up simply through working harder than everybody else. I can relate to him because, at age 15, I started competing in rowing, a predominantly white sport, in a New England boarding school.

A particularly privileged and pompous teammate would outright tell me that I had no potential in the sport and should “join the soccer club team like everybody else.” Of course, the “everybody” he was referring to was other Asians that were small and frail like me. This lit a fire in me that still burns deep and has helped me to meet challenges and overcome obstacles in every aspect of my life. Just like Jung, I told myself that I would be the hardest worker in the room and never let anyone or anything stop me.

With the [recent rise in violent hate crimes](#) against Asian people, Jung defeating his opponents in a sanctioned fight is a form of defiance for not only Koreans, but also Asian people as a whole. Although Jung has never publicly expressed his opinion on the violent hate crimes against Asians in America, he breaks the stereotype of Asians being weak and docile through his fights. To me, he represents the fighting spirit of

Koreans that has been [passed down for generations](#). He shows that Asians shouldn't be the targets of unprovoked and cowardly attacks just because people think that we won't fight back.

Of course, [the people these thugs often target are Asian women and seniors](#). It uncovers the pathetic and shameless nature of these attacks against the seemingly defenseless. As a college student in New York City, [where Asian hate crimes are highly prevalent](#), I've learned that nowhere is truly safe for the most vulnerable Asians. On top of the countless videos I've seen of Asians being brutally attacked on streets and subways in broad daylight, I encounter Asians being targeted and mistreated on a nearly daily basis. The fact that I feel the need to walk my female Asian friends, who [carry pepper spray in their bags](#), home at night enrages me and sheds light on the disheartening reality.

Win or lose, Jung gives everything he has in his mind and body to show the world that we won't go down without a fight. In return, the Korean people give everything we have in our support for him. On the night of his fights, people gather in sports bars or in front of living room TVs with their families. Watching his fights as a community, we are unified in the feeling of representation and pride when he wraps the Korean flag around his body as he heads toward the ring.

His nickname "The Korean Zombie" perfectly sums up the spirit of Jung and the Korean people. No matter how bloodied up his face or how many times he is knocked out cold on the cage floor, he always finds a way to get back up and continue fighting. No matter how many cowardly and despicable hate crimes are committed against innocent Asians, we, too, will get back up and keep fighting.

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